

January 19, 2015

Volunteers for Literacy at Ridgemont High School

Background

Ottawa's prosperity depends on its success in attracting, welcoming and retaining new Canadians. Each year, over 6,000 new Canadians arrive in Ottawa. Ottawa also has the second largest refugee population in Canada with 70 mother tongue languages (other than English and French) regularly spoken in our city.

With this influx in population comes a set of challenges that schools and teachers are facing on a daily basis:

- 11% of children and youth in Ottawa are born outside of Canada; many are introduced into the school system with no English or French skills
- 14% of school drop-outs in Ottawa are new Canadians
- Language barriers negatively affect children in the school system - many have parents that do not speak English or French and are unable to take part in school activities or assist with homework
- Many students additionally suffer with language-based learning disabilities - over 15% of Ottawa student population has a form of learning disability

The increasing enrolment of newcomer children means that schools have to provide increased services for teaching literacy in English or French. While schools are providing smaller classes so teachers can provide more help, volunteers play a critical role in providing one-on-one help to students. Getting additional one-on-one support for a student takes a team of dedicated and caring adults:

1. The Teacher identifies roles for volunteer support
2. The Principal designates a willing staff person to be the school volunteer coordinator
3. Ottawa Volunteers in Education recruits, screens and matches volunteers to schools
4. The School Board curriculum coaches train the volunteers
5. Caring adults from the Ottawa community apply to volunteer in schools

All of these steps, and many more in-between, must happen before the student can benefit from the one-on-one volunteer support!

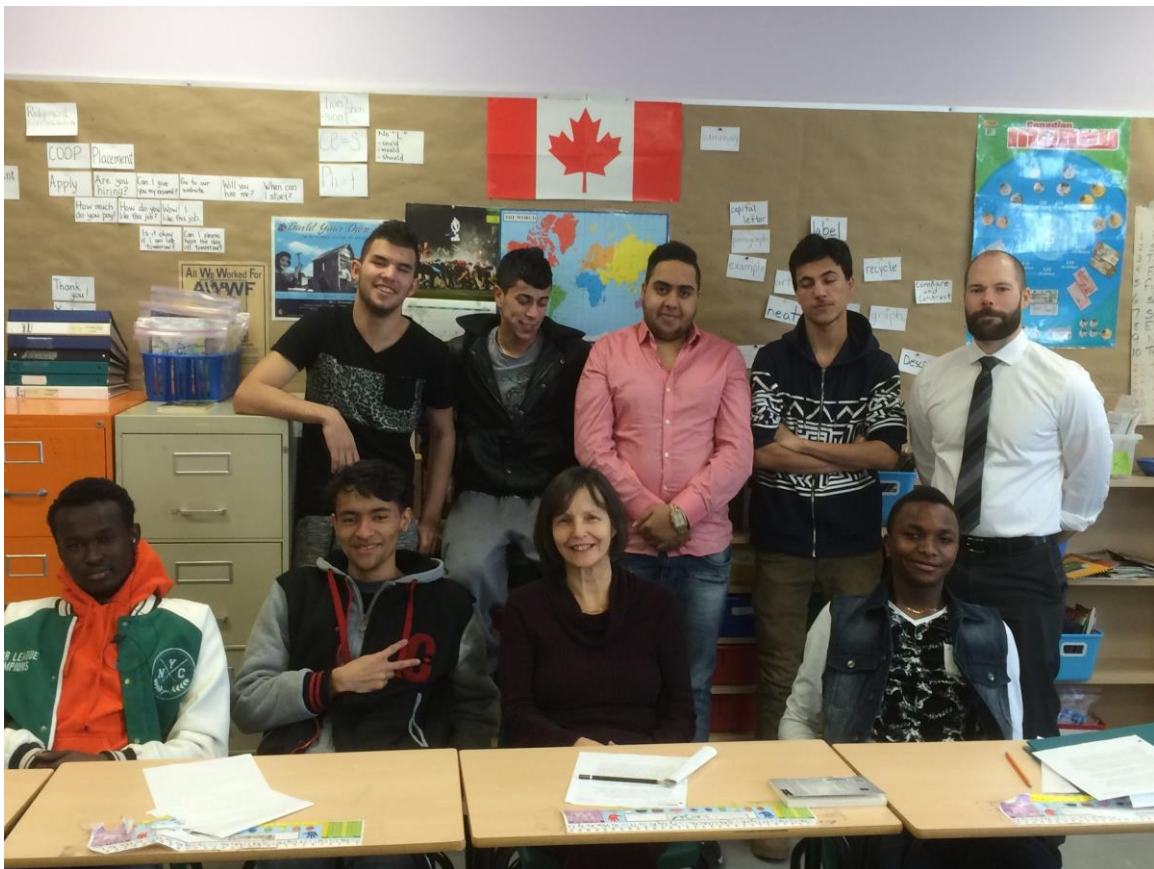
Educator Chris Bell teaches and mentors students at Ridgemont High School in one of three Ottawa Carleton District School Board designated secondary school English Literacy Development (ELD) classrooms. ELD programs are for students new to Canada who, due to various factors, have significant gaps in literacy skills and/or numeracy skills. These learners receive support for both language acquisition and academic upgrading.¹

“Various factors” deserves an explanation to give perspective on these incredible young students. The reasons they attend the program are as varied as the languages spoken in the classroom: students may have never attended school; were not allowed to go school

¹ http://www.ocdsb.ca/med/pub/Publications%20%20Updated/ESL_ELD.pdf

for political or religious beliefs; lived in refugee camps; or lived in war-torn countries. As a result, there can be gaps in their learning. Some ELD students are learning to read and write for the first time.

The Ottawa Volunteers in Education program (OVIE) recruits screens and safely matches community volunteers with schools and classrooms to help students achieve their academic potential. OVIE currently has over 1,500 volunteers assisting in 195 Ottawa schools. One-on-one support for students is the cornerstone of the OVIE program. Mr. Bell welcomes volunteers into his classroom to give his students additional support from caring adults. OVIE interviews volunteers throughout the year to facilitate volunteerism in schools and to channel the efforts of volunteers so that they can share their expertise as effectively as possible in the community.



Mr. Bell's ELD Class

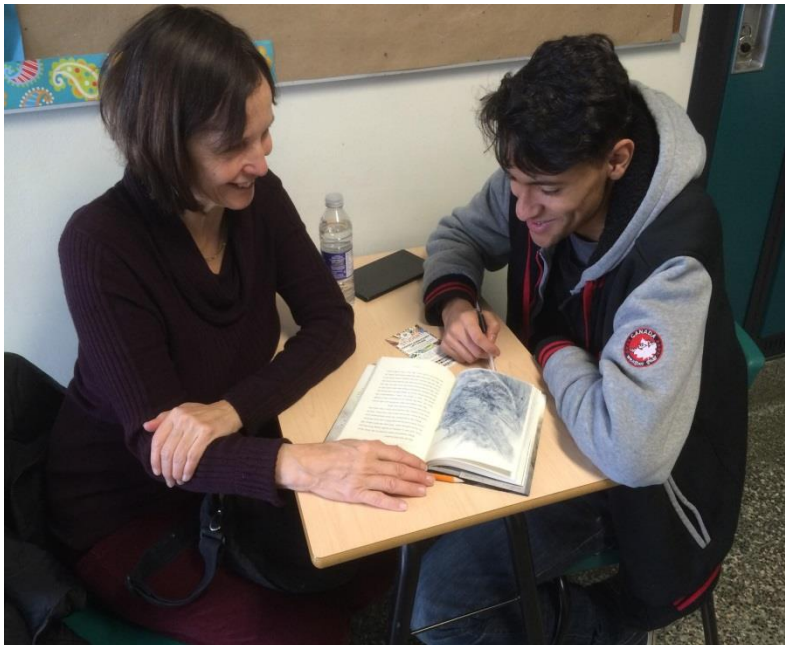
In a typical volunteer interview, I do not get to interview the students or their teachers, but when I interrupted Mr. Bell's class as he taught a lesson on empathy so that I could meet with Susan one of several ELD volunteers in his class, the curious students wanted to be part of the action. Starting with, "What are your names and what languages do you speak?"; Bikash from Nepal speaks Nepali, Hindi and English; Jonathon speaks Swahili, French and English; the two Alis from Iraq speak Arabic and English; Mohammed from Somalia speaks Somali and English; and Juan from Colombia speaks Spanish and English. What impressed me was how proudly they said, "...and English".

"What were the major challenges for you when you arrived in Canada?" The answers were unanimous: the SNOW, learning English, and making friends. When I asked about the food

in Canada they all starting talking at once; how different it is, the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables year round, and lack of variety. They shared many opinions. Susan and Mr. Bell who have both lived and worked abroad agreed with them.

I was expecting obvious answers to the question, “What do you learn from the volunteers who come in weekly to help you?” Jonathon, a student from Congo, articulately surprised me: “We have a chance to learn about volunteering and how volunteers help in schools. It is easy to see how I can be a volunteer in the future.” Giving back to the community, as a future volunteer, is a hoped for outcome of OVIE, but it was not the answer I was expecting to hear from a student! He continued, “Sometimes when we read, the text is too difficult. Volunteers give us the chance to understand the text; they explain what the unknown words mean which allows us to challenge ourselves to read more difficult books.” Ali added, “What we learn at school we go home to help our little brothers and sisters.”

Interested in their career plans, I asked, “What are you going to study after you graduate from high school?” Their answers were similar to any other high school students, but these young men answered quickly and confidently. “I want to become,” a mechanic, police officer, musician; “I want to” join the army, study computer design, attend college or university. Being able to read and write is critical to achieving these objectives. It was an honour and privilege to meet the students in Mr. Bell’s class and I was thankful for this opportunity.



Susan Gardiner, ELD Volunteer

Susan has been an ESL volunteer at Ridgemont High School for two years. After a rewarding career with the Canadian International Development Agency and the World Food Program, she enjoys assisting and engaging with new Canadians in learning English as a second language at the schools in Ottawa. She is one of several volunteers that provide two or more hours of service a week.

Susan assists the ELD students to improve their literacy skills including reading, pronunciation, comprehension, and helping with assignments and homework. "I want to help kids so that they can participate in our society. Being able to read and write is key to this. I believe that these kids have experiences that are very different from home grown Canadians and they may be tomorrow’s leaders in an ever changing world. We see this trend in some of the up and coming immigrant authors and entrepreneurs in Canada."

Assisting in preparation of CVs was one assignment that informed her of the many skills and talents of the students. For example, in assisting one student who had indicated no experience on his C.V., she found out that he was being paid for his contribution as a musician leading and teaching his church's musical program and for gigs. Helping students to realize how to sell their own skills is crucial to their success.

She advises, "While kids may have studied and know science in Arabic for example, they have to understand English to pass their science tests. Literacy is key to ensuring that these new Canadians will be equipped with the skills to enter our workplace including everything from completing application forms, communicating via internet with employers and colleagues in the workplace to understanding employment records and payroll forms."

When asked about a funny situation while working with a student, she recalls that a student was reading a book about a homemaker who wanted to be a pirate. The student did not understand the term "pirate". Susan asked if he had seen the movie Captain Phillips with Tom Hanks, which he had, and explained that the Somalis were pirates. He said "But why would this woman want to be a pirate? Susan could only say that the book is trying to be funny. They both laughed imagining this woman in a dingy hunting down Captain Phillips.

How strange it must be to arrive in a country with large homes, individuals drive one, two, or more cars, and have so much. Susan reflected on how she used to experience reverse culture shock when she returned home from assignments abroad because there was so much life and color on the streets in developing countries and in Canada, it is so sterile. She felt she could empathize with students to some degree but was quick to add that the ELD students were coming from very challenging situations - which she may have observed on her travels but never really experienced.

Susan is passionate about helping these students improve their literacy skills and Mr. Bell is thankful for Susan's support and dedication to this group of students. "Susan may decide to move up with the students, which is a reflection of the relationships she's made with them."

About Mr. Bell

Chris Bell has also lived, worked, and travelled abroad and, like Susan, working with a diverse group of students appealed to him. Chris has been a teacher for nearly 6 years. He was chosen to teach the ELD class because he had worked successfully in a sheltered classroom with ESL high school students. His additional qualifications in special education and ESL, along with his international experience, made him a perfect candidate to teach the all-male ELD class at Ridgemont.

Mr. Bell is so proud of his students. "They are ambitious, engaged in the class. They want to answer questions and always ask to read with the volunteers. The students want to work with the volunteers one-on-one where they see the benefits immediately." He continues with pride, "There are days when we are all frustrated, but there are days when everyone is working hard with the volunteers or together in small groups, when everyone is engaged in learning. I stand back and smile. It was at one of those moments when a student looked up at me and said, 'You look really proud right now.' Moments like that can fuel you for weeks."

Chris' passion to teach this population of students is infectious, "Witnessing students seeing snow for the first time is awesome. You get to live your 'first snow' experience over and over." He talks about the importance of the smaller class size. "It is easier to build relationships and to see how they grow as individuals. There is a very real satisfaction in witnessing and being part of their successes."

It is obvious Chris loves teaching, and I asked him how he chose his profession. Often great teachers had great role models, but Chris says he also learned a lot from his personal experiences in school. "I had some very good teachers and some very bad teachers. I learned how I wanted to be from the positive teachers and how I didn't want to be from the negative teachers." He also had the opportunity to coach rugby; he liked supporting kids one-on-one. Chris graduated from the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Education program with a teachable in geography, and with a love of travel, he left Canada to teach abroad for several years to experience different cultures and ways of living. It is for these reasons that he loves teaching the ELD students.

"The students can be very challenging. They have experienced so much before arriving in Canada and can have a difficult time adjusting to being in school. However, if I can say a few words in their language, there is an instant connection. They respect me more because I have made an effort to understand them. And to relate to and understand them has direct benefits for their success."



Ruth McKeague: School Volunteer Coordinator

The secret to success for Mr. Bell's students is their own work ethic, their empathetic teacher and the wonderful support from volunteers like Susan. However, school volunteer programs only work well when there is a dedicated staff person to work with OVIE to manage volunteers. At Ridgemont High School, that individual is Ruth McKeague.

Ruth is the school librarian who volunteered several years ago to be the School Volunteer Coordinator or SVC. OVIE recruits, screens and matches volunteer candidates to the school where the SVC then completes an interview and if 'it's a fit' matches the volunteers to teachers who want extra support for their students. Chris says this about Ruth: "Ruth is amazing. I just ask Ruth for volunteers and within moments she's on it, and within days we have these great volunteers in the classroom." Both Ruth and Chris agree it is the one-on-one support from volunteers, who help students with their individual needs, that is so valuable.

Ruth is appreciative for the support she gets from OVIE, "The Ottawa Volunteers in Education program is essential as it provide us with qualified, screened volunteers whose interests, and work experience or academic backgrounds are just what we are looking for. Having all that taken care of for us is why it works. We would not have qualified or safe individuals assisting in schools without OVIE."

Ridgemont is a high school that repeatedly requests and welcomes community volunteers. Ruth says, "We are so grateful for the support. High schools need just as much support from volunteers as elementary schools do. Special needs students at any age benefit from the support of caring, qualified adults."

Empathy

Empathy is the understanding of another's feelings. Dr. Stephanie Leclair psychologist and Ph.D, recently provided OVIE volunteers with a specialized workshop on how to support students experiencing anxiety. She gave the volunteers lots of great tools, techniques, and tips, but she said that the bottom line was that, "Research in resilience does show that people who steer through life's adversities the best can often name one caring adult from their childhood - someone who encouraged them and supported them."

To become a school volunteer or for more information about the Ottawa Network for Education's many programs that support schools and students please visit www.onfe-rope.ca or contact Anne Brouillard Ottawa Volunteers in Education Program Coordinator abrouillard@onfe-rope.ca 613-366-3085 x255 or Lee-Ann Scott, Director, Volunteer Programs lscott@onfe-rope.ca 613-366-3085 x253